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OUR AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS

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THANKSGIVING DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITARIAN CHURCH

IN PHILADELPHIA

AUGUST 6th 1863

BY W. H. FURNESS

MINISTER



PHILADELPHIA

PUBLISHED BY T. B. PUGH

S. W. CORNER SIXTH AND CHESTNUT STS.

1863

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# DISCOURSE

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DEUT. VIII. 10.

“THOU SHALT BLESS THE LORD THY GOD FOR THE GOOD LAND WHICH HE  
HATH GIVEN THEE.”

I come here to-day, my friends, with peculiar alacrity. I am glad of the opportunity offered us for the united expression of the thankfulness that every thoughtful man feels in view of our public affairs; and who is there that has not been made thoughtful in these times? It is no formality that we are here this morning to observe. We have reasons for the heartiest gratitude. First and foremost among them all, beyond any special cause for thanksgiving that we may have in recent events, is the large liberty which is ours by the course of nature, by inheritance. And what I invite you now to consider, that your hearts may swell with gratitude, are the Equal Institutions to which it is our rare felicity that we were born. Never have we had such reason to prize them as now. Of these I propose particularly to speak.

It is only very recently, within less than the last three years, only indeed since the Rebellion broke out, that the present generation has been made at all aware of the worth of the social advantages enjoyed by the population of these free Northern States. For long years before, upon the return of our national birth-day and as other occasions were presented, we were wont to

glorify our civil and religious liberties in all manner of high-sounding phrase. But there was very little of a discriminating sense of their value. From a material point of view we could not be blind to their worth. We could not help seeing what power and wealth they were accumulating, how rapidly and to what greatness the nation was growing under them. But of their choicest uses, of their moral effect, of the part which they take in forming the character of the people, in breathing a soul into the nation, in a word, in making the nation what it is, we have had no clear and strong sense, and mainly for two reasons.

First, because the moral influence of institutions is never a matter of outward observation. Although it is constant, it is silent and works in numberless unnoticed ways. Men are affected by it as by the light, and they take no more note of it than of the air that they are breathing. Rarely do they know what spirit they are of, or how much it is determined by the circumstances and social forms established around them. The moral results of these come under the eye only upon great occasions, at critical hours. And they cannot even then be handled, weighed, or measured.

And then again we have failed to appreciate the moral effect of our free institutions, because it has been hidden from us by the steadily increasing disturbance caused by that unequal and oppressive institution which has been suffered to coexist with them. The trouble which this caused grew to be so serious that it soon came to monopolize public attention. For years past it has been the one engrossing topic. So that it has naturally seemed to many that, however excellent in theory, our republican institutions, practically, were serving but

little purpose save the purposes of oppression and tending to the ruin of the nation. For fifty years and more the Constitution was interpreted and the Government administered with an all but exclusive concern for an institution radically at war with every idea of equal justice and personal liberty. Consequently our free institutions, as representative of these ideas, seemed to be so neutralized as to have become nothing more than hypocritical pretences, the forms of liberty without its life.

Thus has it happened that until the present trouble came, we had a very imperfect notion of the value of our political system, what a gift of God it is. But events are enlightening us. Notwithstanding the shadow and the shame of a huge oppression long resting over the whole land, we are finding out now as for the first time that it has not been to no moral purpose that for three-quarters of a century the growing millions of the North have been associated upon such terms of personal equality before the law, as had never before been realized on this globe. Then it was, when the nation was suddenly assaulted, that it broke upon us like a revelation from heaven that, as we have had no privileged classes among us, as the whole tendency of our Northern social life has been, not only to permit, but to encourage the full unfolding of every individual nature, and consequently as no opportunity has been given for the upspringing of those feelings of mutual alienation, contempt and enmity which unequal laws always sow, it had come to pass naturally and of necessity that the hearts of the people had grown into one. Without our being conscious of it, with all our State lines and State rivalries, we of the North had become one people. Silently,

gradually, insensibly, our republican institutions, while in their formal and official action, they seemed wholly perverted to the purposes of injustice, had been creating a grand National Unity. So imperceptibly had the creation gone on, that we never became aware of it, until a violent attempt was made to disintegrate the the nation. Then it was that one sentiment was found animating the whole people of the North, and they rose to the attitude of defence as one man. Then it was that, when to foreign eyes and even to our own, we had seemed to be crumbling into pieces, a living, mighty nation was discovered. It was like the sudden unveiling to the sun of some majestic statue which an artist, hidden within an intricate scaffolding, had been for years steadily at work in fashioning.

For this then let us thank God to-day, that he has given us institutions which so fully embody and so faithfully apply the principle of human equality that the hearts of the people have grown together and become one. To this principle, thus brought into practical operation, this Nation owes its existence and its vigor. So constituted is our social condition, that instead of the ill-will and hostility which must always abound where all are not regarded by the law as equal and alike, it is made the nature of our people to respect, every man his neighbor's rights. It is as natural here, this mutual respect, as iron and coal are in Pennsylvania, or granite and ice in New England.

I do not mean, however, to say that the people of these Free States are without fault in this respect. I do not forget what human nature always has been and is, and how the love of power and a host of selfish passions, are always straining upon the leash, always

endangering the good order of society. I do not mean that all social evils have here come to an end. Far from it. But I do say, that, so far as the civil order of things here instituted is concerned, the tendency has been and is to create an unprecedented degree of social harmony. There is no occasion given here by our social forms for the growth of those disorganizing passions which unequal social arrangements always favor, and which are forever threatening the internal peace of nations, and creating the argument for strong governments. On the contrary, our American social system, so far as the political forms of a people, which, while they are the people's work, become, in return, the creators of the people, forming the popular character, —so far, I repeat, our social constitution operates to generate a controlling sentiment of respect for personal rights, which is the security of the public peace, a sound public conscience in relation to the intercourse of man with man.

And so powerfully has it worked in this way, so strong a sense of justice and personal liberty has been wrought into the very being of our Northern people, and become their second nature, the genius of the place and the people, that, at this hour, when so deadly an assault has been made upon the life of the nation, when so powerful a conspiracy has been formed for its destruction, and by a class of men upon whom the nation has lavished its offices and honors, and whom it has protected in the monstrous right which they claim to make merchandize of humanity, when too, the people, incapable of believing in the possibility of anything so wicked and so insane as a rebellion against a Government unexampled for its freedom, have been

taken wholly unawares; at this hour, thus fiercely assaulted, thus taken entirely off their guard, so deeply has the sense of equal rights been planted in the Northern mind by the institution of Freedom, that, with the odds so fearfully against them at the moment, the people have repelled the assault, have more than kept their foes at bay, and everything indicates their sure and perfect triumph.

Yes, friends, for the hopeful aspect which the Cause of the Nation now wears, we are, first above everything else, indebted to that which our Republican Institutions have made to be the ruling genius of the North,—the love of justice and freedom. We have had no great men. But we have a great people, great, not through any superiority of blood, not through the prestige of any previously won martial renown, not through any new and wonderful endowments of intellect, but great, through that sense of equal rights, which the constant influence of our social surroundings has converted into an instinct, a feeling so identified with the very blood and muscle of the people, that, like the folly of the fool, though you should bray them in a mortar, you could not make them let it go.

Such is the blessed, the inestimable product of our Republicanism. It has been introduced into the Northern nature unconsciously, like the kingdom of God, "without observation," through no merit, no effort of ours. Our own will has had as little to do with it as with our breathing or the circulation of our blood. It is the pure gift and grace of God, vouchsafed to us through the happy circumstances in the midst of which His bountiful Providence has appointed our lot. And for this great favor, which we had done nothing to

deserve, let us offer our fervent thanks to the Great Giver this day. Not to ourselves be the praise, but to the Infinite Power in whose hand the hearts of men are as clay in the hand of the potter.

And thank God, too, that our republican forms have been so potent, and have produced a love of freedom so strong that the nation is standing in triumph a trial so severe as the present. For, I repeat, it is this, the public spirit of the North, that has brought us thus far, and to which our success is due. We have a man standing at the head of the nation, who, for his immovable singleness of purpose, possesses the public confidence to a degree which has never been exceeded. We have in the National councils and in the field, men, faithful and brave, whose names will be held in undying honor. But neither, in council nor in the field, has there appeared any extraordinary genius to command events and compel success. To the spirit of the people is it owing that the National integrity has been so wonderfully maintained. It is this that, without hesitation or stint, keeps pouring into the hands of the Government, material resources that seem well nigh inexhaustible. It is this, that is presenting to the world so manly an instance of National patience under delays the most wearisome and defeats the most humiliating. It is this which accepts delays and defeats and all manner of errors as a gracious discipline, intended to harden us into perseverance and render us only the more earnest. It is this which has organized the humanity of the North, initiated the women into one vast sisterhood of Mercy, and sent a host of men and women to surround the battle-field with all possible means and appliances to alleviate its sufferings. It is

this, which, to so remarkable a degree, has saved the general mind from the vindictiveness which a civil war especially tends to kindle. It is this which is steadily and rapidly gaining one of the grand triumphs of the time: the destruction of the barbarian prejudice of race, and the opening to the men of African descent of a career in which they may not only receive justice, but win gratitude and renown. And, above all, it is this which has prompted thousands and hundreds of thousands to rush to the defence of the country, in no spirit of bitterness, not from any impulse of personal ill-will, but to suffer and die in that sacred behalf. And thousands, with a heroism which has never been surpassed, have made the last most costly sacrifice of patriotism, laying life in its full bloom with its tenderest ties and most brilliant hopes, upon the altar of their native land. Never was chapel or shrine so hung all round and all over with such precious votive offerings as the temple of our National liberty is now. Dearer than ever should our country be to her children, consecrated as she is by so much noble blood poured out for her sake. Holier than ever should be her cause, and more earnest than ever our purpose to cleanse her royal robes of every stain and spot of the foul poison which has threatened to destroy her.

For long years we have been told that these Free Institutions of ours were only an experiment, that they were on trial, and that it was very doubtful whether they could stand any test. We did not perceive that every year they lasted, they were working without intermission, as busily as God works in the spring-time, as busily as He works at all times, to mould this people and inspire them with a spirit which should be their



strength at such an hour as this. The truth is, the Evil One has been trying all the time to baulk the institutions of Freedom. That we saw. That we could not help seeing. For, as the Devil works always against the grain of a Universe which he did not make, but which the good God made for his own good purposes, he must needs make a great noise and dust. He finds nothing made to his hand. And though he use all his cunning (and therein his genius chiefly lies,) to hide his hand, and not let it be known what mischief he is doing, he cannot entirely disguise himself, no, not even though he put on the form of an angel of light and move never so softly. With all his devices, he makes such an uproar that he attracts universal attention. And our attention being thus taken up, we forget that the good God is working far more busily still. He never rests. But as He has created all things for His own good uses and every atom serves His will, He makes no dust, no noise, and so His working escapes our notice, and we do not discern the operation of His hands.

Thus has it come to pass that we have not seen how the social order, established in these Northern States has been forming the nature of the people. But now, at this extraordinary period, when the seed so secretly nourished has burst forth into gorgeous flower,—now what escaped our notice is apparent enough. Now it is plain how our Republican Institutions have grown into the popular heart. Now they are put to the test and they have thus far stood it, how triumphantly! I am at a loss to conceive how they could be more severely tried. Have not some hundreds of thousands of able-bodied men, the strength and pride of the land, gone to

hazard limb and life in support of the Government, and this of their own free will or in deference to the demands of the public sentiment of the country? And now that the public necessities require a still larger amount of military service, could the people be subjected to a severer test than the Draft? Could anything show more satisfactorily what a deep foundation our institutions have in the affections of the people than their acquiescence in this compulsory measure? To my thinking, our Government is shown to be of unsurpassed strength. Is there a Government now on the face of the Earth, or has there ever been one, that can boast so broad a basis in the good-will of its people? Our form of government ought to be the strongest in the world, for it is the people's own choice; and what it ought to be, as is now shown, it is.

I do not overlook the fact that the unanimity of the North is not absolute. It would be a suspicious circumstance if it were. It would look too much like the unanimity of the South, and as if it had been produced by the same means. What Southern unanimity is, we all know. It is the result of a reign of force and terror, to which the reign of terror in the old French Revolution is but a passing shadow, and which was established in the South, years before the Rebellion broke out, dooming men to instant outrage and death, not for any act done or word spoken, but for the opinions it was suspected they must entertain as strangers of Northern birth. Under such a rule, the people of the South are of course unanimous. Only heaven-sent saints and apostles could have been otherwise minded. We can lay claim to no such unanimity. We were too long associated with the South in upholding a system

of oppression at war with our Northern institutions, too long was the Northern mind drugged with that poison, to escape the blindness moral and mental, which it causes. And it was no more than was to be expected, that, when the hour of open disruption came, there should be found a portion of our Northern people who had become so perverted by the habit of advocating the cause of our Southern brethren, that they had entirely forgotten their Northern brethren, and had learned to prefer the oppression of the African race to the salvation of their country; a class, to whom there is nothing worthy in the land unless it is watered by the tears and blood of slaves, no music in the voice of Liberty, unless it mingles with the clanking of chains and the groans of the oppressed.

So far from being surprised that there are so many here in the North whose prejudice against a race is stronger than their love of their country, we may well wonder that there are not more, when we recollect how active, for three quarters of a century, the Slave Power was in depraving the moral sense of the nation, in deadening the minds of the people to the supreme worth of equal liberty, in teaching them to account the vital principles of our Bill of Rights as mere "glittering generalities." Why, the institution of Human Bondage was once so powerful that it had become the fountain of office and honor, and slave-masters were deferred to as scarcely less than a titled nobility. It was prophesied at an early period by one of the Pinckneys, that, if Slavery lasted fifty years it would extinguish the love of liberty in the land. It has extinguished it at the South, and to such an extent that people there avow their preference for monarchical institutions. And the wonder is,

I say, that it has not unfitted the people of the whole country, North as well as South, for a republican form of government. At one time it really seemed as if the prediction of the Southern statesman had come true, so ready was the nation to concede everything to the Slave Power, so unpopular was it everywhere to speak a loud word in defence of the first and fundamental principle of the Declaration of Independence. Then when the very language of Liberty had become harsh to the public ear, then it seemed as if the spirit of Liberty was indeed extinct, and that the indignant remonstrances of a few against the extending empire of the Slave Power were but the dying spasms of our national life.

But it was not so, and let us this day thank Heaven from our inmost hearts that it was not so. Instead of being dismayed at such manifestations as we witness of the existence of a class here at the North in sympathy with the Southern idolatry of bondage, rejoice and be thankful rather that the spirit of Liberty has proved too strong to be wholly overcome by the Slave Power. Although such powerful influences were so long and so constantly at work, such blandishments and such threats,—enough to deprave the very elect,—now, thank God, it is made apparent that the popular heart is true to freedom still, and a unity of feeling exists, which, having brought the nation thus far, will, I trust in heaven, suffice for all the working purposes of this great exigency.

Whatever may appear to the contrary, the main tendency of things is, not to the diminution, but to the increase, of Northern unanimity. The course of events is revealing, more and more plainly, the hatefulness of the Slave Power, showing what barbarism follows in its train. Strange is it, passing strange, after all that

has occurred, at this late hour, that there should be any persons among us of ordinary intelligence who do not yet perceive that this bloody struggle, with all the misery it involves, is the direct and inevitable consequence of that monstrous and deeply-seated Wrong. But such persons there are, persons whom even the New York riot, with its horrible barbarities, has left unconvinced; persons who could not be persuaded of the truth though Jackson and Clay and Webster were to rise from the dead to declare it; persons whose views are so completely inverted that they insist that it is not the thieves who disturb the public peace, but the people who first raise the hue and cry against them. Still, although such there are, the main current runs in the right direction, onward. The chains of prejudice and error are loosening and dropping off all around us, and we are constantly meeting with those who rejoice in their newly found deliverance.

Let us be thankful, then, for the spirit which has come to us through our Free Institutions. It is a thing to be thankful for, for it is no acquisition of ours, but the pure gift of heaven. Without our will, almost against our will, by the force of our happy and freedom-favoring circumstances, it has been breathed into us until it has become a governing principle of the Northern mind. And, moreover, to the free bent, to the genius for freedom, ingrained, naturalised into the Northern character we owe our safety, thus far to this, the grace of God, and to this unaided and alone.

The spirit of the North owes little of its strength to any foreign sympathy. There is another nation on the other side of the Atlantic, a people, from whom our people sprung, and to whom we are united by strong

ties of unprecedented intimacy. A common blood, a common language, a common literature, a common love of liberty and a common faith have bound England and America together as no two great independent communities have ever before been united in the history of the world. The case has no precedent nor parallel. On the one hand, England, venerable in the renown of centuries and clothed in the authority of the highest civilization yet attained by mankind; on the other, America, young, advancing, strong in her English blood, holding English opinion for the public opinion of the world, and emulating English greatness. When this ferocious slaveholders plot was sprung upon us, had our mother country evinced that feeling for us which her near relationship to us and her high Anti-slavery reputation justified us in expecting, what animation would it not have given to the hearts of our people! We did not look to her, we never dreamed of looking to her, for material aid. But we did expect that the public voice of England would have come rolling in incessant thunders across the Atlantic in denunciation of the attempt to erect a Slave empire within the precincts of Christendom, and in scorn of a proffered alliance with the dealers in human flesh. Had that expectation been fulfilled, had we had from England the moral support which our descent and her great history warranted us in depending upon, there is no telling, I repeat, what strength it would have given us. It would have been more to us than whole fleets of iron-clads. But, as we have learned to our bitter cost, our dependence upon English magnanimity was mournfully misplaced. When the life and death struggle of Freedom and Slavery began, the English government had no higher position to take towards it

than the ground of a strict neutrality, moral as well as material; and England feels no hurt to her honor in so interpreting her laws as to permit pirates to be fitted out in her ports and manned by Englishmen to prey upon our commerce, and to put under bonds the vessels returning to us from her shores, whither they had been sent laden down with food for her starving poor.

It is well for us, however, that it has been so. Our National Independence is thus become assured abroad as well as at home. And only the more plainly is it made to appear that to the Nation itself and alone is the triumph of the Nation due.

But not only are we fighting the battle of Freedom, uncheered by the sympathy we had a right to look for, the fact is disclosed that, however friendly the interest felt in us here and there abroad, there is no public earnest national goodwill for the Republic anywhere in all the world. Instead, however, of discouraging us, the discovery of this fact must have no effect but to impress us all the more deeply with a sense of the grandeur of our Cause. We are contending, it appears, for universal freedom, against all oppression, abroad as well as here. The coldness, nay, the worse than coldness of foreign governments, the satisfaction, which they have not been able to conceal, at the prospect of our breaking up, has reminded us of what indeed we ought not to have forgotten; that monarchies and aristocracies are by nature hostile to republican institutions. To princes and nobles and their retainers the idea of equal rights is necessarily repugnant. They are bound to despise it. Its triumph will be a disaster to all the forms of despotism or mastership, limited or unlimited, throughout the world. Having a Cause so great, we

can afford to bear with composure the dislike of foreign governments. Let them stand aloof and make no sign of sympathy with us, but send their congratulations to the French usurper upon the success of his buccaneering assault upon Mexico. It is enough that we know that we have the prayers of every lover of liberty, of the John Brights, throughout the world. Let us be content to win success through no outside help, but by the pure strength of that love of justice and of freedom with which, through the Free Institutions He has given us, God has inspired this people.

And thank Heaven, my friends, to-day that our republican system is as pacific in its external as in its internal relations, as powerful to maintain peace with others as to produce unity among ourselves. In times past, before this civil trouble broke out, when we presented the appearance of an undivided Union, our growth in power was so great that England and France never sought, they took good care to avoid, all occasions of quarreling with us. They paid us, in form at least, a scrupulous respect. There was reason in those days why this country should inspire dread. But that reason existed, not in our republican institutions, but in the anti-republican power which was then in the ascendent in our national councils. Slaveholding had fed and fostered those passions from which, ever since the world began, have come wars and fightings. It is the essential vice of despotism, in all its forms, that it necessarily develops the love of power to an inordinate degree, and renders the privileged class, be they called kings, lords, or slaveholders, imperious, impatient of the restraints which the rights of others impose, quick to take offence, to make their will the law to others as



it is to themselves, and so comes discord. In fine, it destroys the sense of justice in those who practice it, and, as we are now learning to our cost, there is no such thing as living in peace with those who have lost that, who do not hold the rights of others to be as sacred as their own. Yes, this Republic, with its mighty resources and rapidly increasing millions, was indeed formidable to the peace of the world, but only when the Slave Power, being in the control of its administration, was breeding in it the lust of power which alone could render it aggressive. But even British statesmen, with all their native sagacity and high culture, have been so blinded by their aristocratic biases, and by the greed and the prospect of immediate advantage, that they do not perceive that, in the very nature of things, a republican form of government like ours is and must be, of all forms of government, the most pacific.

Where every man is habituated from his birth to a restraining sense of the equal rights of others, and rulers exercise their brief and limited authority under the constant pressure of the principle of equality, which has become the pervading sentiment of the people, there no opportunity is afforded for the growth of that excessive love of power which is forever driving men and nations to encroach upon the rights of others and so to make wars inevitable. Hence it is that a community, based upon an acknowledgment of the equal rights of all, while it tends by its very nature to internal harmony, is, of all communities, least inclined to aggression. Were this fact discerned, the nations would see that, in the countenance which they are giving to the attempt that is making to establish a slave empire on this soil, they

are preparing to bring into Christendom a new fomenter of discord, and putting in additional peril the peace of the world. As they would avert wars and fightings, they should accord their special sympathy to the cause of the American Union now that it is striving unto blood to rid itself of that one element, which is just as truly hostile to its amicable relations to other countries, as it is now fearfully proved to be to its own existence.

But unhappily this same war-generating element of injustice, in greater or less strength, in forms more or less disguised, is present, a vital element in all the leading governments of the old world, forming the views and prompting the measures of those who administer them, and therefore it is not a Slave empire, but the Republic, which is most hated. And it must be confessed, a republic is indeed terrible to all the upholders of privilege and unjust power, and the more terrible, the more faithful it is to its principles, the more harmonious it is in itself, and the more disposed it is to mind its own concerns and meddle with none; for then what an overwhelming argument is it against all those social systems which, sacrificing the many to the few, and continually disturbing the so-called balance of power among themselves, make peace the exception, and war the rule in the history of mankind! It is indeed so. A true republic, a community, founded upon justice and practically observant thereof, must be a terror to the whole world of oppressors, hateful most of all, as we now see, to those who are accustomed to practice the grossest injustice. Well does Jefferson Davis prefer association with hyenas to Union with the free men of the North. There can be no doubt of that.

We may believe him there. It is a more congenial companionship.

We shall never need to engage in a crusade against the despotisms of the old world. We must leave it to them upon the slightest pretexts to interfere by force of arms with other nations as the French tyrant is now doing in Mexico. It is their nature and their doom. We have only to be true to ourselves, only to let the light of the Republic so shine, the light of harmony at home and peace abroad, and civil and religious liberty will fill the world with a glory, before which the darkness of oppression, here and everywhere, shall vanish even as the morning mists disappear at the rising of the sun.

Dear friends, notwithstanding all the sorrows of the time, and they are neither few nor light, although in our several circles we miss beloved ones, yet let us join in hearty thanksgiving that God in his mercy is doing such great things for us, inviting us to be fellow-laborers with him in advancing the best interests of mankind. It is in this sacred work that our friends, brothers, sons, are hazarding and offering their lives. The anguish of bereavement must be alleviated by a sense of the glorious Cause for which these precious sacrifices are made. Be it ours so to testify our gratitude to Heaven, so to labor and endure to the end that it shall not be in vain that this great price of blood is paid.









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